

Hunter's tale serves as reminder to landowners, hunters alike

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By **BRETT FRENCH**
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Chad Heiser feels vindicated, but the few days he spent worrying about the six-point bull elk he shot still gnaws at him. And his experience serves as a warning to all hunters, as well as private landowners.

Heiser, 45, of Lovell, Wyo., was hunting along the western front of the Bighorn Mountains near Spanish Point on Oct. 15 when he tracked down a nice bull. Two shots later, he had the big elk down.

That's when the trouble started.

Heiser was cutting out his tag when two men approached. He recognized one as Hyattville-area rancher Keith Hamilton.

Heiser was feeling happy. He'd just filled his tag.

"I said 'howdy,'" and he didn't say anything," Heiser recalled.

Then Heiser said Hamilton told him, "I have to deal with people like you every year."

Heiser was confused. "I know I'm on public land, and he said, 'No you're not.' He made a big deal out of assuming I was trespassing."

Rather than argue, Heiser gutted the elk, took some photos and hiked the mile and a half back to his truck.

When he got back to the road, Heiser found a game warden's pickup parked nearby. He left a note on the window and headed back to camp. On the way, he met Bureau of Land Management ranger Aaron Kania and explained what had happened.

Kania said he was able to follow Heiser's tracks in the snow and prove he was on public land the entire hunt.

"Chad had his maps, knew where he was and had done his research before he left the house," Kania said. "Chad helped me make the case."

Because Hamilton had interfered with Heiser's hunt, Kania issued a citation

for interfering with a lawful user, a misdemeanor that can be punishable by up to six months in jail or up to a \$1,000 fine. Hamilton chose not to fight the charge and paid a \$225 fine in November.

"Chad Heiser was absolutely 100 percent in the right," Kania said.

Yet Heiser felt like the victim. And because he couldn't get back to the bull right away, part of the animal's front shoulder spoiled.

"It should've been a happy elk hunt," Heiser said. "But I was more concerned at the time with being charged with trespassing and why I couldn't read my map right."

Rumors quickly spread that Heiser had been charged with trespassing. Friends and acquaintances asked him what he'd done.

"People kept calling me, asking: 'You got charged with trespassing?'" Heiser said. "So a friend suggested I call the paper and set the story straight. But I didn't want this to look like a vendetta."

Kania said the terrain Heiser was hunting is a mix of BLM, Forest Service and private land. He's run into similar situations on such lands before.

"On an average yearly basis, probably about 15 cases are reported to me,"

Heiser said. Of those, he said he's charged about five landowners with interfering with a hunter.

"The majority of them are a lack of understanding," Kania said. "But we may be seeing an increase in the amount of these cases because the public and BLM have better technology" such as global positioning systems (GPS).

Signing would eliminate such misunderstandings, but such an undertaking in Wyoming or Montana on vast swaths of federal lands is difficult, costly and time consuming. Kania's Worland field office alone contains 2.5 million acres of federal land.

"It's totally impossible for us to mark every border," Kania said.

So hunters — and landowners — need to know exactly where boundaries lie to avoid confrontations. It's a lesson Heiser had already learned, but now is deeply seared into his brain. He's also stiffened his resolve since the run-in.

"Don't be so intimidated when these guys try to run you off public land," Heiser said. But also, "Make damn sure you know where you are."

Brett French can be reached at french@billingsgazette.com or at 657-1387.

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